



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Confession: Good for the Church

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Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (Jas 5.16)

At first blush, James 5.16 seems straightforward. We know Scripture well enough to know that sin must be confessed, that God expects his people to do his will in a one another community, and that we should pray for each other.

But when we begin to look more closely at verse 16, questions arise. How do we apply the expectation of community confession? What does it look like in practice? What things are we to confess? All sins, or just certain ones? How do we make it work in church? Are we to do something like the small meetings in the 18th century “methodist” movement where each person was required to confess his/her sins? Or is it sufficient to follow the teaching of Matthew 5.23–26 and seek out the specific person who has something against us? Or, do the verse’s plural verbs and pronouns, including the reciprocal “one another” (ἀλλήλων, *allēlōn*), require something more? (The above is summarized from McCartney 2009, 257; and Moo 2000, 246.)

In other words, is James telling believers something each of us needs to do as an individual, or something we are to do together as a community?

Review: Defining Confession

As noted [previously](#), confession is first about acknowledgment. As Moo writes, ἐξομολογέω (*exomologeō*; Jas 5.16) “means, basically, ‘agree with’ (see Luke 22:6), but in the NT usually refers to a verbal acknowledgement of God’s greatness (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21; Rom. 14:11; 15:9; Phil. 2:11) or of our own sins (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5; Acts 19:18)” (Moo 2000, 246). Two examples, both noted in our previous study, will suffice to illustrate Moo’s definition: Matthew 10:32 calls on Jesus’ followers to acknowledge him even when persecuted (vv. 23–25); and Matthew 3:6 says John’s preaching led many to confess their sins, in contrast to the Pharisees and Sadducees who also heard him (vv. 7–9).

To summarize, confession includes verbalization as part of the willingness to humbly acknowledge the existence or rightful place of that which is confessed.

A Case Study from James’s Tradition

In light of the “one another” emphasis in verse 16, we call attention to McCartney’s observation that “corporate prayer requires corporate confession, and this produces corporate forgiveness. This is not new in James. Daniel’s prayer in Dan. 9:4–10 particularly expresses corporate confession as a prerequisite to corporate forgiveness and a preliminary to corporate intercession” (McCartney 2009, 257).

Daniel’s prayer, included in Daniel 9.4–19, occurred in the first year of Darius’s reign (ca. 539 BC) at a time when Daniel was reflecting on Jeremiah’s prediction that Judah’s exile would end after seventy years (Dan 9.1–2; cf. Jer 25.11; 29.20). It concludes with a bold petition to God to forgive the people and restore their respect in the world community (Dan 9.16–19). Although Daniel says, “I prayed to the LORD and made confession” (v. 4), his language throughout the prayer is corporate: “we have sinned, ... have not listened ... to us belongs open shame ... we have rebelled against him ...” (vv. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).

Notice that the confession in Daniel’s prayer is framed by an explicit reference to the covenant (v. 4) and an allusion to the events that made Israel the covenant people (v. 15). Daniel includes *all* Israel among those who committed the sins he enumerates, even though some—like himself and Jeremiah—had not been personally guilty. He mentions sin, wrongdoing, rebellion, disobedience, and a failure to listen to the prophets (vv. 5–6, 8–10). He includes all who had been scattered into many lands (v. 7), declaring that all were guilty and had not acknowledged it before God:

All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him. He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem. As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by your truth (Dan 9.11–13).

Daniel’s prayer is among the most powerful in Scripture, all the more so because it is a *corporate* prayer.

James 5: Community Confession for Community Sin

James 5.16 amounts to an exhortation to follow Daniel's example. James takes note of a circumstance where one person has an illness/weakness, but, as the plurals in verse 16 show, he quickly shifts to a corporate outlook. Anyone who is sick should call for the community's elders whose prayer will restore him and see the Lord raise him up and forgive him, including forgiveness of any specific sin behind his illness. Because that absolution will occur, the larger community can also be assured that they will be healed when they confess sin since the same power will work in their lives too.

When we keep the recurring theme of the letter in view, we expect the emphasis we see in 5.16. From James's opening statement about trials, he has repeatedly spoken in terms of the group (e.g., the plural pronouns and verbs in 1.3, 5; this plural emphasis is often obscured in English translations because we use the word *you* as both a singular and plural pronoun). The sins he mentions are referred to in plural terms (e.g., 1.21–22, 27) and specific sins, such as showing favoritism to one type of person, are laid at the feet of the group (2.1–7). The fights and quarrels they were experiencing (4.1–3) were also communal offenses. McCartney thus well summarizes the point in 5.16 when he writes, "Corporate confession is appropriate for corporate sin" (McCartney 2009, 258).

Yes, each individual is personally accountable for his/her sin—and should confess as needed. But, as in Daniel's day, the community will also have trouble and wounds that will be resolved only through communal acknowledgement even if not every person has participated in the sins that are the immediate cause of a problem. This is sensible, since confession is more about acknowledgement than verbalization. Often, the biggest obstacle to community prayer is found in a failure to practice the solidarity which sees the community as a whole admit the sin. Spiritual wounds are never healed and conflicts remain unresolved because some members reason that, since they "were not involved," they can distance themselves from the issues. Daniel's example of including himself—and even implying that someone like Jeremiah shared in the community guilt—is therefore instructive.

Conclusion

At a time when congregations often seem to be more individuals who happen to participate in worship services together than a body/community comprised of "members one of another" (Rom 12.5; Eph 4.25), perhaps nothing will help us more than periodic times of community confession—especially in a church that, like the one to whom James wrote, is under duress and trial.

Works Cited

- McCartney, Dan G. 2009. *James*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Baker Academic.
- Moo, Douglas J. 2000. *The Letter of James*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

An Additional Thought on James

“A more recent version of [the] ‘James the legalist’ [misunderstanding] is held by scholars who say James only repeats Jewish moral instruction, so there is nothing specifically Christian in his teaching. It is true that James is Jewish moral teaching. So is most of the moral teaching of Jesus. Since Jesus came to fulfill the Law and Prophets (Matthew 5:17), how can it be otherwise? James repeats the moral teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. However, James (like Jesus) takes conventional moral wisdom (both Jewish and Greek) and redefines it in light of the incarnation and the sure return of Christ. James’s ethic is thus eschatological (from the Greek word ἔσχατος, *eschatos*, ‘last,’ that is the last days). He tells Christians how to live as they wait for Christ’s return. Thus, James is a thoroughly Christian book.”

~ Gary Holloway. 1996. *James & Jude*. The College Press NIV Commentary. College Press Publishing Company, 22–23

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